

LESSONS  
FROM  
THE  
FIELD

# Increasing Safety in America's Public Schools

**The mission of the Public Education Network is to create systems of public education that result in high achievement for every child.**

**The Network mobilizes citizens and communities to increase public responsibility for ensuring the right of every child to attend a high-quality public school. Equal opportunity, access to quality public schools, and an informed citizenry are all critical components of a democratic society.**

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Over the past decade, Americans have witnessed a steady escalation in the number and type of brutal violent attacks in our public schools. These actions have many worrying about the safety of their own children, but the reality is that America's schools are still among the safest places a child can be on a daily basis. This is not to say that school violence is not a problem that requires vigilance and attention at the national and local levels.

Even though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that violent acts by American high school students declined between 1991 and 1997, we have reason to be concerned and to take action. Though the most extreme forms of violence are rare, the threat of all kinds of violence can keep students away from school, prevent them from going to after-school events, and leave them in fear every day. Fear of harm or violence prevents active learning and high student achievement.

Close to 53 million young people go to our nation's schools each day, and ensuring their safety is a major issue for parents, teachers, administrators, and students. Recent events and increased media attention



to safety issues have only increased the public's focus on this issue. Our communities deserve safe schools that educate kids and help keep neighborhoods safer. Making schools safe places for students and adults is the whole community's concern—teachers, parents, students, policy makers, law enforcement officers, business managers, faith leaders, civic leaders, youth workers, and other concerned community residents.

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As the Public Education Network (PEN) and its member local education funds (LEFs) are committed to creating systems of public education that result in high achievement for every child, we believe that equal opportunity, access to quality public schools, and an informed citizenry are all critical components of a democratic society. Part of making available a high-quality public education is ensuring that students and teachers spend their days in safe schools, which are free from violence, free from fear of harassment and threatening situations, and conducive to teaching and learning.

Five local education funds have helped their communities broach these difficult issues with conversations on national and local issues of safety and violence in schools. During the last part of 2000, more than 250 people participated in conversations in Buffalo, NY; Lancaster, PA; McKeesport, PA; and Paterson, NJ. In February 2001, the local education fund in Atlanta, GA hosted a conversation that included students, teachers, principals, law enforcement officials, parents, and other community leaders.

These local education funds conducted their community dialogues on school safety and violence as part of an assessment of their community's readiness and capacity to address the health and well being of children in their public schools. This assess-

ment included looking into issues of health insurance coverage, coordination of health and social services for children and their families, maintaining safe learning environments, and the level of resources devoted to children's health and social services. Participants, therefore, understood that these community dialogues are not just "one-shot" efforts at addressing school safety and violence but as a part of a more comprehensive approach to address the systemic issues affecting children in their public schools.

The local education funds used *The 1999 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, Violence in America's Public Schools: Five Years Later*, as a starting place for their conversations, to ground their local experiences in a national context. This *Lessons from the Field* provides a summary of the MetLife survey and highlights findings from the conversations in four local education fund communities. (Law enforcement officials are referred to in this publication as "officers." All teachers and students referred to here are from public schools, and all "schools" referred to are public schools.)

## **National View of School Safety: The MetLife Survey**

*The 1999 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, Violence in America's Public Schools: Five Years Later*, underscores that school violence is still as much or more of a problem than it was five years ago, even as the nation as a whole sees decreases in overall crime. The MetLife study investigated the issue of school violence from the perspectives of students, teachers, and law enforcement officials. For the study, MetLife surveyed 1,044 students in grades 3 through 12 and interviewed 1,000 public school teachers in grades 3 through 12 and 100 law enforcement officials. The findings of the MetLife survey include:



- All three groups mention common top three **causes of school violence**: lack of parental supervision, peer group pressure, and involvement with drugs or alcohol.
- Students who are **more likely to be victims** of school violence are more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school, live in neighborhoods with a lot or some crime, and have hardly any or no parental involvement with school.
- Officers report that **most acts of violence** occur in school neighborhoods, while one-third of teachers and students perceive that most happen on school grounds.
- The majority of teachers **feel very safe** while they are at school. They are, however, more likely than five years ago to have been a victim of a violent act. Two-thirds of students are not worried about being attacked at or around school, but in both 1993 and 1999, one-quarter of students had been victims of a violent act at or near school.
- Large numbers of teachers and officers reported that **girls are more involved as aggressors** in violence than they were five years ago.
- Teachers and students in urban areas are more likely to **perceive gang violence as a problem** and playing a big part in daily life than do those in suburban or rural areas.
- One in eight students report that they have **carried a weapon to school**, the same number as in 1993 and about the same number in urban as compared to suburban/rural areas. Students and officers mention knives as the most frequent weapon in schools, whereas teachers mention handguns.

## A Broad View of School Safety

Local education funds define school safety broadly, with some or all of the following components.

- Well maintained and secure school facilities, with controlled entries and hall monitors
- A safe route for students to travel to and from school
- Counseling, mental health services, and programs to foster self-esteem
- Peer mediation and conflict management programs
- Substance awareness and abuse prevention education
- Race and cultural awareness and programs to promote tolerance
- Police presence in schools and positive relationships between police officers and students
- Code of conduct policies
- Emergency procedure manuals

In Lancaster, community members described a safe school as an atmosphere where people don't have to think or worry about safety issues. Students in Buffalo described a safe school atmosphere as clean, well lit, properly maintained, and cheerful, with teachers who are friendly and supportive. They attributed the principal with the power to create a safe atmosphere by "not putting up with" any kind of trouble.

## LEF Experiences

Participants found that many of the conclusions in *The 1999 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, Violence in America's Public Schools: Five Years Later*, were also true in their local communities,

**The Metropolitan Life Foundation was established in 1976 by MetLife for the purpose of strengthening communities, promoting good health and improving education. To help people make more informed decisions about their health, MetLife supports national health promotion and education initiatives, particularly for young people. The Public Education Network extends gratitude to MetLife for their partnership in supporting substance abuse prevention, HIV/AIDS education and prevention, school health education, and promoting healthy lifestyles.**



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and they expressed further ideas about the causes of violence and unsafe environments in and around schools. Below are specific local findings in categories similar to the MetLife report.

### **Causes of Unsafe School Environments**

Community members in Paterson agreed that the sharp racial divide between students and teachers is a significant contributing factor to unsafe situations in schools. The school staff in Paterson is 80% white, while the student population is 95% children of color. In addition, community members reported that classroom mannerisms show that some teachers set low expectations for children of color, and students respond with disruptive behavior or by refusing to learn.

Students in Buffalo see that violent situations in their own schools are often caused by students who transfer from other schools.

In Lancaster, principals said they do not have the personnel they need to provide sufficient supervision outside classrooms, in school bathrooms, locker rooms, hallways, and playgrounds. The police perceived school staff as too tolerant of disruptive behaviors. But teachers expressed fear of not being supported by administrative staff or of being assaulted by students as reasons for not disciplining disruptive students.

School nurses in the Mon Valley attributed some school violence problems to an increase in mental health issues among students, including depression and others for which nurses dispense a greater amount of medication than they have in past years. Community members in the Mon Valley ranked lack of family and community involvement as second in their top five health and safety concerns.

### **Who is Likely to be a Victim of School Violence**

In Buffalo, officers described students who were most likely to be victims as weaker, different (physically, cognitively, or in their up-

bringing), and lacking street smarts (and therefore more likely to be bullied by other students). Students agreed, but also added that violence is random, often coming from kids trying to prove something, or who are just plain crazy. Students and teachers both agreed that new, inexperienced and substitute teachers, and those who don't know how to recognize the start of a violent situation, are more likely to be victims of violence.

### **Growing Violent Acts Among Girls**

Participants at the Public Education Network's annual conference agreed that, in their local communities, they were seeing parallel trends with those in the MetLife survey: girls were more likely to be involved in gangs than they were five years ago.

Officers in Buffalo agree with this national finding, reporting that girls tend to resort to physical violence more quickly and are more willing to carry weapons than they were five years ago. The officers attribute this change to peer pressure, which, they say, is a "great motivator" and creates a "need for girls to prove more."

### **Feeling Safe at School**

The experiences in the Mon Valley mirror the national picture: half of the students participating in the community conversation and all of the teachers reported that they usually or always feel safe at school.

### **Gang Activity**

Students in Buffalo reported that a few well organized gangs in the city made other students feel like they needed to start or join a gang of their own for protection.

### **Prevalence of Weapons**

Officers in Buffalo find that, instead of bringing weapons into the school building, students tend to leave weapons under bushes or other hidden places away from the school, intending to commit a violent act or defend themselves on the way home from school.



## Student Assistance Program

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Student Assistance Program is a systematic process using effective and accountable professional techniques to mobilize school resources to remove the barriers to learning. Teams of counselors, teachers, administrators, nurses, and liaisons with county agencies help assess what services students need and provide or connect students with those services.

Team members are formally trained by the state departments of education and health and public welfare. Parents are informed of problems affecting a student's school performance and involved in resolving problems.

For more information, see the state's Student Assistance Program Web site ([www.sap.state.pa.us](http://www.sap.state.pa.us)).

## Action and Policy that Promotes School Safety

Local education funds are poised to broker connections and advocacy in their communities to promote school safety. The MetLife school safety conversations revealed several promising practices to address issues of safety and make our schools safer environments for students and teachers.

Paterson participants stressed the need for full implementation and enforcement of **code of conduct policies** that include rules and expectations for civil behavior to ultimately support learning. The conversation revealed that educating and involving the community and parents is key to making sure that schools and students heed the policies. (See side box.)

Since the greatest safety concern in Lancaster is students walking long distances to and from school, participants suggested

the addition of safe transportation (busing) for those students in order to provide a **safe route to school**. Participants in Paterson suggested several other options: community safety watches, safety patrols of parents and older students, additional security guards and crossing guards, and zoning that changes traffic patterns around schools.

Middle and high schools in the Mon Valley all have a **Student Assistance Program**

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Paterson  
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## Code of Conduct Policies

The Code of Conduct adopted by the school board in Paterson, NJ, creates an imperative for civil behavior that supports learning. The Code includes rules and expectations of acceptable behavior, mutual respect, basic manners, and clear consequences for not meeting the expectations.

In their conversation, community participants in Paterson outlined ways to fully implement a Code of Conduct:

- The Board of Education should lead a campaign to make staff and community aware of the code
- All schools should follow a uniform Code. Parents and students should sign Code agreements at the start of each school year.
- Parents should be involved in the development of the Code, and local education stakeholders (community groups, social service agencies, churches) should know about the Code and be involved in helping promote the behaviors among students.

**School resource officers in Buffalo are thought of as a positive violence prevention measure, as they are in schools to mentor and provide help to students rather than act as security guards. Community members in Buffalo reported that improved training for officers to help them become more proactive and visible in schools could help decrease incidents of violence.**



The Education Fund  
for Greater Buffalo

(as required by state law) to which students can be referred for help with academic, drug and alcohol, teen pregnancy, and mental health problems. (See page 5.)

Schools in the Mon Valley take advantage of **safe schools grants** from the state of Pennsylvania. The state requires grantees to create plans for decreasing the incidents of school violence.

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Participants in Lancaster and Paterson expressed the need for better **cultural awareness and understanding** between staff and students as a strategy for creating safer environments. Interestingly, students in Lancaster said that diversity in schools fosters a sense of tolerance and acceptance among all students.

In Lancaster, students and parents noted that **school buildings should be more secure**, with locked doors and controlled entry, so the school staff knows who enters the building. Some community residents, however, felt that a more open environment, where more community members are present in the school, would help improve student safety.

## Next Steps for LEF Communities

Generally, the LEFs who participated in PEN's School Safety Community Conversation project will disseminate their findings of local community readiness and capacity to address health and social service needs and violence prevention among their community's students.

APPLE Corps in Atlanta, GA convened its community conversation by the

end of February. The school district's superintendent participated, and the conversation focused on the local implications of the MetLife survey.

The Paterson Education Fund in Paterson, NJ will also work with the school board to develop an implementation plan for the board-approved Code of Conduct. The plan would include a district-led public awareness campaign and school visits by board members to explain the Code.

The Mon Valley Education Consortium in McKeesport, PA will also disseminate survey responses of teachers and students regarding perceptions of safety and awareness of safe school plans, helping the school district and community focus further conversations on school safety.

The Lancaster Foundation for Educational Enrichment in Lancaster, PA will advocate for recommendations raised at the community conversation, including busing for every student who walks across town to school. The LEF will partner with the community's Network for Safe and Healthy Children to continue work on convening groups together to address school safety.

The Education Fund for Greater Buffalo in Buffalo, NY will work with teachers and students on violence prevention programs, including a day-long event and the ongoing "Project Respect." In addition, schools and law enforcers will work together to improve communication between officers and students.

## For More Information On School Safety

*Violence in America's Public Schools: Five Years Later. The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1999.* Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Examines the issue of violence in public schools from the perspective of students, teachers, and law enforcement officials, and compares the findings with MetLife's 1993 study on the same

## LEF Demographics

LEF	Population of Students	Free- or Reduced-price Lunch	Minorities
Buffalo, NY	143,823	30%	25%
Atlanta, GA	60,000	74%	93%
Paterson, NJ	24,000	73%	93%
Mon Valley, PA	49,000	32%	16%
Lancaster, PA	11,000	43%	68%

issues. Full report available on the Web.

Web site: [www.metlife.com/Companyinfo/Community/Found/Docs/ed.html](http://www.metlife.com/Companyinfo/Community/Found/Docs/ed.html)

*1999 Annual Report on School Safety.* U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Safe and Drug Free Schools Program, 1999. Contains national data on school crime and safety issues; highlights 54 communities with promising approaches and other programs that work; and features several resources.

Web site: [www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS).  
Order by phone: 1-877-4ED-PUBS

*Violent Kids: Can We Change the Trend?* National Issues Forums Institute and Public Agenda, 2000. Contains an overview and outlines three choices for addressing the issue, including a nonviolent popular culture, more help for kids at risk, and more moral discipline for kids. Web site: [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org)

*Safe Schools, Safe Students: A Guide to Violence Prevention Strategies.* Drug Strategies, 1998. Includes advice for schools, processes to develop effective strategies, and specific information for comprehensive health, K-12, and peer mediation programs.  
Web site: [www.drugstrategies.org](http://www.drugstrategies.org)  
Phone: 202-289-9070

*Making Schools Safe for Students: Creating a Proactive School Safety Plan.* Peter D. Blauvelt, author. Order through Corwin Press. Web site [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)  
Phone: 805-499-9774

*Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook for Community Action.* National Center for Injury Prevention and Control of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000. Best practices include parenting and child development education for families, family mentoring, social and conflict-resolution skill building for youth, and youth mentoring. Web site: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

*The National Association of Student Assistance Professionals* advocates for professionals and programs that promote student achievement; healthy, safe, and drug-free lifestyles; and strength-based approaches in working with youth. The Web site contains information on Student Assistance Programs. Web site: [www.nasap.org](http://www.nasap.org)

**“We learned that community members think that if they are more involved with students and schools, they can help decrease drug and violence problems among students.”**

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